

Sermon: Get you up to a high mountain! Reverend Heidi Champagne 12/6/20

Will you pray with me, please?

Can you remember the last piece of good news you heard? Now, I know this is 2020, but that is not a rhetorical question! Do you remember the last piece of good news you heard? It may be small scale- your favorite author released a new book or your favorite musician dropped a new album, or you're having your favorite dinner. The news might be somewhere in between "yay! pizza!" and cataclysmic...a good grade on a paper, a promotion, an unexpected opportunity. Or the news might be a deal changer- a life changer- like the promise of a vaccine and an end to a pandemic or news of a new baby. I'm guessing that whatever your news, there was some element of surprise, some excitement, and maybe even a feeling of déjà vu. Often what precedes the good news is uneventful or mucky or even strange and seemingly bizarre. (Yes, I'm talking to you, 2020!) But the thing about impending good news is that it is hard to see it from flat ground. It's difficult to notice and feel the energy of change when we're standing shoulder to shoulder (or masked and 6 feet apart!) with what we know, clinging to the comfort and tradition of what has always been.

In our two texts today, we see evidence of this. In our reading from Isaiah, we hear the call to the people of Jerusalem to stand up- to rise up and declare the good news of the God who loves and lifts them. These people who had survived slavery and exile, plague and pandemic, violence and voicelessness are our spiritual ancestors. We may not remember the atrocities they survived, but they are a part of our DNA as Christians who follow a Jesus who came from the tradition of Judaism. We are reminded of our fragility and of God's steadfastness in this verse from Isaiah : "A voice says "cry out!" and I said "what should I cry? All people are like grass that fades and withers, but the word of our God will stand forever."

And, from the gospel of Matthew today we have the story of John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness. This admittedly strangely dressed, likely unkempt man who dines on locusts and wild honey appears into a time of hopelessness and fear. He shows up in the wilderness amidst a people in disarray and despair. This "wilderness" is figurative- a place of uncertainty in which people felt untethered, disjointed, even disconnected from their faith. John the Baptist shows up, and begins to call people back to God. Yet he does this by proclaiming that the real good news is coming after him-people just can't see it or perceive it yet.

Both of our scriptures follow this Advent theme of remaining awake, being alert and gaining perspective.

Have you ever been in the balcony of the church? I know that in pre-covid times, it was some of your preferred spot, though I could never figure out why. To me, the balcony always felt set apart-kind of disconnected. It felt like overflow seating when we had a full church on Christmas or for a wedding or funeral. It felt like a place for latecomers to slip into a seat unnoticed. But this week, I dragged two of our Christmas trees up to the balcony so that they can be seen, lit up through the windows on Christmas Eve. As I unpacked the trees from their boxes, my heart ached for the lack of festivity around decorating and the missing energy and enthusiasm of the people who typically help decorate. I thought back to the beauty of the sanctuary last Christmas, with the driftwood creche from the Tarsa family, and the Advent root from my ordination, and 4 trees lit and decorated in ivory and gold. I thought of my widowed former father in law, who attended church on Christmas Eve with our family, and who was moved to see his late wife's ivory colored angel ornaments decorating the trees in the sanctuary. "Nothing would have

made her happier.” He had told us through tears. I thought of the ornaments that many of you brought to share during Advent last year on the trees of hope, peace, joy and love. I remembered the music- the beautiful organ and choir at the first service and the NCC acoustics at the 11 PM service. I remembered the little boy who chatted with me throughout the invitation to communion, and the laughter and joy that filled our sanctuary as the children waved colorful glow sticks every time I said the word “light”. I remembered your testimonies at the late service- your stories of hope, peace, joy and love, shared from your hearts. I remembered being exhausted, but elated. I remembered greeting and hugging so many people as they exited the sanctuary into the magic of Christmas. From this spot on the balcony, this week I could “see” all these things as though I was watching a movie, and I was gifted a new perspective. My heart began to lighten at the memory of last year, and the realization that although this pandemic has been a long and unexpected road, it is simply a stretch of road on our journey together. The balcony is no mountain, but it is high enough to lend a new vantage point. As I fluffed the two trees, I looked out the window and thought for the first time about what people see when they look at our church from the outside. What do the people who never enter our sanctuary see? As I pondered this, two people walked by with their dogs. As though on cue, each of them looked up when walking past the church. In the time that I was in the balcony, 5 cars drove by. Each driver looked up when driving past the church. Whether subconscious or coincidental, these glances up were food for thought. We have something here that some people don’t have. We have what our scripture from Isaiah alludes to. We have the word of God, and we have faith, which stands even when we are covid fatigued and discouraged. We have the word of God that is not transient and fragile like we humans are. We are standing in the wilderness together right now. We are gathered in the parking lot and on zoom and none of it has the splendor of silent night sung by candlelight in our sanctuary. We are lonely and tired and frustrated and overworked and tired of zoom meetings and homeschooling and the lack of space and privacy and time boundaries that working from home causes. We feel isolated, or as though we just can’t carve out an inch of privacy. We miss our extended families, our lunch dates, our church family, our potlucks and spaghetti suppers and the Christmas fair. We are in a murky, wilderness time in many ways and we long for comfort. There is no good news in the rising numbers of positive covid cases. There is no good news in the hundreds of thousands of losses.

Yet, from the perspective of that balcony, I began to wonder if a pandemic and the adaptations we are forced to make may be a prelude to good news. Our worship in the parking lot is visible to the community around us. Our ways of being church these days--collecting meals for Father Bill’s, collecting hats and gloves for Marshfield students in need, collecting gift cards for the community coalition that is responding to the issue of homelessness in Marshfield, our outdoor youth group, and theater arts program, our silly Sunday School Christmas Pajama photo shoots, are all taking place within the view of those who are waiting and watching and wondering why and how we hold onto hope and peace in these times. People don’t need to look up to see the ministries of this church. They simply need to look around.

I hope that by next Christmas we will be in our beautifully decorated sanctuary with music and light and liturgy and the Christmas message. I hope that we can celebrate communion together. But I also hope that we will be thinking about who can’t be there, who is isolated and lonely, who feels unworthy, who walks or drives by and looks up, but doesn’t dare come to our door. Who might watch us on Youtube or worship with us on Zoom.

How do we move toward peace in a world where peace feels elusive? Where can we get in touch with some good news for a change? I invite you to look around and look within. In what ways are you being called to reach out? Maybe it is making a phone call, sending a card, starting a zoom group, reaching out to that person you haven't seen and have been wondering about. We are in murky wilderness times, but these times often precede good news; but the thing about impending good news is that it is hard to see it from flat ground. It's difficult to notice and feel the energy of change when we're standing shoulder to shoulder (or masked and 6 feet apart!) with what we know, clinging to the comfort and tradition of what has always been. Get you up to a high mountain-or a balcony, or a drive in or zoom service and look around with love for what has been and will be again, and appreciation for all that the wilderness has to teach us. Amen.